

No. _____

IN THE SUPREME COURT OF THE UNITED STATES

DARIUS JAMES FRANCIS,
Petitioner,

v.

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA,
Respondent.

On Petition for Writ of Certiorari to the United States
Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit

PETITION FOR WRIT OF CERTIORARI

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QUESTIONS PRESENTED

1. Whether 18 U.S.C. § 922(g)(1) violates the Second Amendment under *New York State Rifle & Pistol Association, Inc. v. Bruen*, 142 S. Ct. 2111 (2022).

2. Whether Congress may criminalize intrastate possession of a firearm or ammunition solely because the firearm or ammunition crossed state lines at some point before the defendant came to possess it.

PARTIES TO THE PROCEEDINGS

All parties to petitioner's Fifth Circuit proceedings are named in the caption of the case before this Court.

DIRECTLY RELATED PROCEEDINGS

- *United States v. Francis*, No. 4:21CR0085, U.S. District Court for the Southern District of Texas. Judgment entered November 10, 2022.
- *United States v. Francis*, No. 22-20577, U.S. Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit. Judgment entered December 19, 2023.

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PRAYER

Petitioner Darius James Francis prays that a writ of certiorari be granted to review the judgment entered by the United States Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit.

OPINIONS BELOW

The opinion of the United States Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit in Mr. Francis's case is attached to this petition as Appendix A. The district court did not issue a written opinion.

JURISDICTION

The Fifth Circuit issued its opinion and judgment on December 19, 2023. *See* Pet. App. A. This petition is filed within 90 days after the entry of judgment. Sup. Ct. R. 12.1. This Court has jurisdiction under 28 U.S.C. § 1254(1).

CONSTITUTIONAL AND STATUTORY PROVISIONS INVOLVED

U.S. Constitution, Art. I, Sec. 8, cl. 3

The Congress shall have Power . . . To regulate Commerce with foreign Nations, and among the several States, and with the Indian Tribes[.].

U.S. Constitution, amend. II

A well regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed.

18 U.S.C. § 922(g)(1) provides in relevant part

(g) It shall be unlawful for any person—

(1) who has been convicted in any court of, a crime punishable by imprisonment for a term exceeding one year . . .

to ship or transport in interstate or foreign commerce, or possess in or affecting commerce, any firearm or ammunition which has been shipped or transported in interstate or foreign commerce.

STATEMENT OF THE CASE

Petitioner Darius James Francis pleaded guilty without a plea agreement to three counts of violating 18 U.S.C. § 922(g)(1) by his possession of two firearms and ammunition. In providing the factual basis supporting Francis’s guilty plea, the prosecutor recited that each firearm was “manufactured outside the state of Texas and had traveled in interstate commerce” prior to the date on which Francis possessed it. As required by the statutory basis for the charge, the prosecutor recited that Francis had been “convicted of a crime punishable by more than one year [of imprisonment] and, therefore, [was] a felon and unable to possess the firearms and ammunition” at issue. The prosecutor’s recitation of the factual basis for the plea did not specify when the firearms and ammunition had traveled in commerce, or whether Francis’s conduct or a commercial transaction in which he engaged caused their movement in commerce. The district court ultimately sentenced Francis to concurrent terms of imprisonment of 97 months on each count.

Francis appealed his conviction and sentence. As relevant to this petition, he argued that Congress exceeded its commerce power when it enacted 18 U.S.C. § 922(g)(1) and that the district court plainly erred by accepting his guilty plea because, under *New York State Rifle & Pistol Association, Inc. v. Bruen*, 142 S. Ct. 2111 (2022), § 922(g)(1) violated his Second Amendment right to possess the firearms and ammunition at issue. The Fifth Circuit affirmed in an unpublished opinion. *United States v. Francis*, No. 22-20577 (5th Cir. Dec. 19, 2023) (reprinted at App. A). It held that precedent foreclosed Francis’s challenge based on the Commerce Clause and that he could not show plain or obvious error on the *Bruen* challenge to the constitutionality of the statute of conviction. App. 2a-3a.

**BASIS OF FEDERAL JURISDICTION IN THE
UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT**

The district court had jurisdiction pursuant to 8 U.S.C. § 1329 and 18 U.S.C. § 3231.

REASONS FOR GRANTING THE PETITION

I. Lower courts require guidance on how to apply *Bruen*.

A. A circuit split has emerged over the constitutionality of 18 U.S.C. § 922(g)(1).

The Second Amendment guarantees “the right of the people to keep and bear arms.” U.S. Const. amend. II. Yet 18 U.S.C. § 922(g)(1) denies that right, on pain of 15 years imprisonment, to anyone previously convicted of a crime punishable by a year or more. Despite the conflict between the statutory and constitutional text, the courts of appeals historically and uniformly rejected Second Amendment challenges. *See United States v. Moore*, 666 F.3d 313, 316-17 (4th Cir. 2012) (collecting authorities).

“Enter [*New York State Rifle & Pistol Association, Inc. v. Bruen*.]” *United States v. Rahimi*, 61 F.4th 443, 450 (5th Cir.), *cert. granted*, 143 S. Ct. 2688 (2023) (citing *New York State Rifle & Pistol Association, Inc. v. Bruen*, 597 U.S. 1 (2022)). “When the Second Amendment’s plain text covers an individual’s conduct,” *Bruen* held that the government must “justify its regulation by demonstrating that it is consistent with the Nation’s historical tradition of firearm regulation.” *Bruen*, 597 U.S. at 24. No longer may the government defend a regulation by showing that it is narrowly tailored to achieve an important or even compelling state interest. *Id.* at 17-24.

In *Bruen*’s wake, courts of appeals have split as to whether 18 U.S.C. §922(g)(1) infringes on rights protected by the Second Amendment. The Third Circuit sustained the Second Amendment challenge of a man previously convicted of making a false statement to obtain food stamps, notwithstanding that the crime was punishable by imprisonment for a term exceeding one year. *See Range v. Att’y Gen. United States of Am.*, 69 F.4th 96

(3d Cir. 2023), *petition for cert. filed* (U.S. Oct. 10, 2023) (No. 23-374). By contrast, the Eighth Circuit has held that § 922(g)(1) is constitutional in all instances, at least against Second Amendment attack. *See United States v. Cunningham*, 70 F.4th 502, 506 (8th Cir. 2023) (citing *United States v. Jackson*, 69 F.4th 495, 501-02 (8th Cir. 2023), *petition for cert. filed* (U.S. Dec. 6, 2023) (No. 23-6170)). The Seventh Circuit considered a more robust development of the historical record necessary at the trial court and remanded the issue accordingly. *See Atkinson v. Garland*, 70 F.4th 1018, 1022-24 (7th Cir. 2023). The Tenth Circuit stands alone in declining to even venture into the historical justifications for § 922(g)(1) — it decided that *Bruen* did not abrogate precedent upholding § 922(g)(1) based on a head count of votes from *Bruen*'s concurring and dissenting opinions and its footnote concerning “shall-issue” regimes. *Vincent v. Garland*, 80 F.4th 1197, 1202 (10th Cir. 2023), *petition for cert. filed* (U.S. Dec. 26, 2023) (No. 23-683).

B. This issue is of exceptional importance.

Bruen's application to § 922(g)(1) will continue to plague lower courts until this Court provides guidance. The Court's anticipated decision in *United States v. Rahimi*, No. 22-915, which will decide the constitutionality of 18 U.S.C. § 922(g)(8), may provide some. But the Solicitor General appears to agree that more is needed. The government has requested this Court's review in *Range*, No. 23-374, which squarely presents the question of § 922(g)(1)'s constitutionality under the Second Amendment; and in *United States v. Daniels*, 77 F.4th 337 (5th Cir. 2023), *petition for cert. filed* (U.S. Oct. 10, 2023) (No. 23-376), which presents the related question of § 922(g)(3)'s constitutionality under the Second Amendment.

Moreover, the issue before the Court implicates the prosecution and incarceration of thousands. As of January 26 2024, the Bureau of Prisons reported that it imprisons 156,854 people.¹ And as of that same date, 21.8% of inmates (31,887) were incarcerated for “Weapons, Explosives, [and] Arson” offenses, the second largest category of offenses within the federal prison population.² “For more than 25 years” in fact, firearm crimes have been one of the “four crime types” that “have comprised the majority of federal felonies and Class A misdemeanors[.]”³ In fiscal year 2021, “[c]rimes involving firearms were the third most common federal crimes[.]”⁴ Of the 57,287 individuals sentenced, 8,151 were firearm cases—a 14.2% share.⁵ This represents an 8.1% increase from the year before, despite the number of cases reported to the U.S. Sentencing Commission declining by 11.3% and hitting an all-time low since fiscal year 1999.⁶

These figures only capture the tail end of the criminal process at the district court. The scope of prosecutions looms larger. “The Department of Justice filed firearms-related charges in upwards of 13,000 criminal cases during the 2021 fiscal year.”

¹ *Statistics*, Federal Bureau of Prisons, https://www.bop.gov/about/statistics/population_statistics.jsp (last visited Jan. 24, 2024).

² *Statistics – Inmate Offenses*, Federal Bureau of Prisons, https://www.bop.gov/about/statistics/statistics_inmate_offenses.jsp (last visited Jan. 24, 2024).

³ *Fiscal Year 2021 Overview of Federal Criminal Cases* at 4, U.S. SENTENCING COMM’N (April 2022), available at https://www.usc.gov/sites/default/files/pdf/research-andpublications/research-publications/2022/FY21_Overview_Federal_Criminal_Cases.pdf.

⁴ *Id.* at 19

⁵ *Id.* at 1,5.

⁶ *Id.* at 2.

United States v. Kelly, No. 3:22-CR-00037, 2022 WL 17336578, at *3 (M.D. Tenn. Nov. 16, 2022) (citing Executive Office for United States Attorneys, U.S. Dept. of Justice, Annual Statistical Report Fiscal Year 2021 at 15 (Table 3C), available at <https://www.justice.gov/usao/page/file/1476856/download>). The scale of the question presented warrants this Court’s attention.

II. This Court should delineate the boundaries of federal authority under the Commerce Clause in the firearm context.

A predecessor to 18 U.S.C. § 922(g), the Omnibus Crime Control and Safe Streets Act of 1968 prohibited “[a]ny person who...has been convicted by a court of the United States or of a State...of a felony” from receiving, possessing, or transporting “in commerce or affecting commerce any firearm.” Pub. L. No. 90-351, § 1202, 82 Stat. 197. *Scarborough v. United States* addressed “whether proof that the possessed firearm previously traveled in interstate commerce is sufficient to satisfy the *statutorily* required nexus between the possession of a firearm by a convicted felon and commerce.” *Scarborough v. United States*, 431 U.S. 563, 564 (1977) (emphasis added). *Scarborough* answered this question “yes,” but the Court did not linger on the constitutional implications of its statutory construction. *See id.* at 577; *see also United States v. Johnson*, 42 F.4th 743, 750 (7th Cir. 2022) (noting that the decision in *Scarborough* “was one of statutory interpretation”); *United States v. Seekins*, 52 F.4th 988, 991 (5th Cir. 2022) (Ho, J., dissenting from denial of rehearing en banc). (“[T]he Court’s holding in *Scarborough* was statutory, not constitutional.”).

By contrast, this Court *did* examine the constitutional question presented by 18 U.S.C. § 922(q) in *United States v. Lopez*, 514 U.S. 549 (1995). The statute “made it a federal offense ‘for any individual knowingly to possess a firearm at a place that the individual knows, or has reasonable cause to believe, is a school zone.’” *Id.* at 551 (quoting 18 U.S.C. § 922(q)(1)(A) (1988 ed., Supp. V)). The district court held that the act constituted a valid exercise of Congress’s commerce power, but the appellate court reversed. *Id.* at 551-52. This Court affirmed the appellate court’s ruling that the statute lay “beyond the power of Congress under the Commerce Clause.” *Id.* at 552. In so doing, the Court cabined Congress’s commerce power to “three broad categories of activity” subject to regulation: (1) “the use of the channels of interstate commerce”; (2) activities, even if intrastate, that threaten “the instrumentalities of interstate commerce, or persons or things in interstate commerce”; and (3) “activities having a substantial relation to interstate commerce, i.e., those activities that substantially affect interstate commerce.” *Id.* at 558-59 (internal citations omitted). The Court quickly disposed of any justification for § 922(q) under the first two categories, focusing its inquiry on the third. *Id.* at 559. It noted that § 922(q) was “a criminal statute that by its terms has nothing to do with ‘commerce’ or any sort of economic enterprise,” elaborating in a footnote that “States possess primary authority for defining and enforcing the criminal law” and that federal criminalization of “conduct already denounced as criminal by the States...effects a change in the sensitive relation between federal and state criminal jurisdiction.” *Id.* at 561 & n.3. The Court also expressed deep concern that the government’s arguments for why possession of a firearm in a local school zone substantially affected commerce lent themselves to no limiting

principle, opening the door to a “a general federal police power.” *Id.* at 563-66. Ultimately, the Court concluded that “possession of a gun in a local school zone is in no sense an economic activity that might, through repetition elsewhere, substantially affect any sort of interstate commerce.” *Id.* at 567. “Respondent was a local student at a local school; there is no indication that he had recently moved in interstate commerce, and there is no requirement that his possession of the firearm have any concrete tie to interstate commerce.” *Id.*

Scarborough and *Lopez* stand in tension, and lower courts have grappled with reconciling them for years. But “whether” intrastate possession of a firearm that crossed state lines long before the regulated possession “affect[s] interstate commerce sufficiently to come under the constitutional power of Congress to regulate” per *Lopez* “is ultimately a judicial...question...[that] can be settled finally only by this Court.” *United States v. Morrison*, 529 U.S. 598, 614 (2000) (cleaned up).

A. Federal appellate courts differ on the relationship between *Scarborough* and *Lopez*.

Federal courts have “cried out for guidance from this Court” on this issue for decades. *Alderman v. United States*, 562 U.S. 1163, 131 S. Ct. 700, 702 (2011) (Thomas, J., dissenting from denial of certiorari). Simply put, “*Scarborough* is in fundamental and irreconcilable conflict with the rationale of the United States Supreme Court in [*Lopez*].” *United States v. Kuban*, 94 F.3d 971, 977 (5th Cir. 1996) (DeMoss, J., dissenting). Still, the Fifth Circuit “continue[s] to enforce § 922(g)(1)” because it is “not at liberty to question the Supreme Court’s approval of the predecessor statute to

[§ 922(g)(1)].” *United States v. Kirk*, 105 F.3d 997, 1015 n.25 (5th Cir. 1997) (*en banc*) (per curiam). *See also United States v. Rawls*, 85 F.3d 240, 243 (5th Cir. 1996) (per curiam) (Garwood, J., concurring) (“one might well wonder how it could rationally be concluded that mere possession of a firearm in any meaningful way concerns interstate commerce simply because the firearm had, perhaps decades previously before the charged possessor was even born, fortuitously traveled in interstate commerce,” but concluding that *Scarborough*’s “implication of constitutionality” “bind[s] us, as an inferior court, . . . whether or not the Supreme Court will ultimately regard it as a controlling holding in that particular respect.”).

The Fifth Circuit is not alone. *See, e.g., United States v. Patterson*, 853 F.3d 298, 301-02 (6th Cir. 2017) (“If the *Lopez* framework is to have any ongoing vitality, it is up to this Court to prevent it from being undermined by a 1977 precedent,” i.e., *Scarborough*, “that does not squarely address the constitutional issue.” (quoting *Alderman v. United States*, 562 U.S. 1163, 131 S. Ct. at 703 (Thomas, J., dissenting from denial of certiorari))); *United States v. Cortes*, 299 F.3d 1030, 1037 n.2 (9th Cir. 2002) (although “[t]he vitality of *Scarborough* engenders significant debate,” committing to “follow *Scarborough* unwaveringly” “[u]ntil the Supreme Court tells us otherwise”); *United States v. Bishop*, 66 F.3d 569, 587-88, 588 n.28 (3d Cir. 1995) (noting that, until the Supreme Court is more explicit on the relationship between *Lopez* and *Scarborough*, a lower court is “not at liberty to overrule existing Supreme Court precedent”); *United States v. Patton*, 451 F.3d 615, 634-35 (10th Cir. 2006) (collecting cases).

Nine courts of appeals have upheld § 922(g)(1) based solely on the *Scarborough* minimal nexus test. See *United States v. Smith*, 101 F.3d 202, 215 (1st Cir. 1996); *United States v. Santiago*, 238 F.3d 213, 216-17 (2d Cir. 2001) (per curiam); *United States v. Gateward*, 84 F.3d 670, 671-72 (3d Cir. 1996); *Rawls*, 85 F.3d at 242-43; *United States v. Lemons*, 302 F.3d 769, 771-73 (7th Cir. 2002); *United States v. Shelton*, 66 F.3d 991, 992 (8th Cir. 1995) (per curiam); *United States v. Hanna*, 55 F.3d 1456, 1461-62, 1462 n.2 (9th Cir. 1995); *United States v. Dorris*, 236 F.3d 582, 584-86 (10th Cir. 2000); *United States v. Wright*, 607 F.3d 708, 715 (11th Cir. 2010). Only two courts of appeals have engaged in *Lopez*'s substantial-effects test and reasoned that § 922(g)(1) is constitutional under it. See *United States v. Crump*, 120 F.3d 462, 466 & n.2 (4th Cir. 1997) (citing *United States v. Langley*, 62 F.3d 602, 606 (4th Cir. 1995) (en banc), *abrogated on other grounds by Rehaif v. United States*, 139 S. Ct. 2191 (2019)); *United States v. Chesney*, 86 F.3d 564, 568-70 (6th Cir. 1996). Because courts often fail to apply the *Lopez* test to these firearm possession cases at all, defendants across the country lack the constitutional protection from congressional overreach provided by *Lopez*. To avoid unconstitutionality, *Lopez* demands that § 922(g)'s "possess in or affecting commerce" element require either: 1) proof that the defendant's offense caused the firearm to move in interstate commerce; or, at least, 2) proof that the firearm moved in interstate commerce at a time reasonably near the offense. But *Scarborough* continues to control the outcome in a large majority of circuits, leaving the "empty, formalistic" requirement of a jurisdictional provision as the only check on Congress' power to criminalize this kind of intrastate activity. *Chesney*, 86 F.3d at 580 (Batchelder, J., concurring).

B. An unchecked Commerce power would significantly expand Congress’s reach into state affairs.

The federal government’s enumerated powers are “few and defined,” while the powers which remain in the state governments are “numerous and indefinite.” *Lopez*, 514 U.S. at 552 (citing *The Federalist* No. 45, pp. 292-293 (C. Rossiter ed. 1961)). One such enumerated power is “[t]o regulate Commerce . . . among the several States[.]” U.S. Const. art. I, § 8, cl. 3. But without limits on federal regulatory power, our nationwide regulation would become “for all practical purposes . . . completely centralized” in a federal government. *A.L.A. Schechter Poultry Corp. v. United States*, 295 U.S. 495, 548 (1935). And “constitutional limits on governmental power do not enforce themselves;” instead, “[t]hey require vigilant—and diligent—enforcement.” *Seekins*, 52 F.4th at 989 (Ho, J., dissenting from denial of rehearing *en banc*).

“Congress may conclude that a particular activity substantially affects interstate commerce” to regulate the activity, but Congress’s mere act of legislating “does not necessarily make it so.” *Morrison*, 529 U.S. at 614 (quoting *Lopez*, 514 U.S. at 557 n.2) (cleaned up). Here, inserting the phrase “which has been shipped or transported in interstate or foreign commerce” after any object connected to intrastate activities that Congress may want to police cannot fulfill the constitutional requirement. *See Alderman*, 131 S. Ct. at 702 (Thomas, J., dissenting from the denial of certiorari) (“*Scarborough*, as the lower courts have read it, cannot be reconciled with *Lopez* because it reduces the constitutional analysis to the mere identification of a jurisdictional hook.”). A judicial blessing of constitutional magnitude for this minimal nexus would “effectually obliterate the

distinction between what is national and what is local and create a completely centralized government.” *Lopez*, 514 U.S. at 557 (quoting *N.L.R.B. v. Jones & Laughlin Steel Corp.*, 301 U.S. 1, 37 (1937)). The Commerce Clause power would be reduced to a rubber stamp, opening the door to a federal police power in direct contravention of the federal government the Constitution enshrines. *See Morrison*, 529 U.S. at 618 (“the Founders denied the National Government” “the police power,” “reposed in the States”); *Nat’l Fed’n of Indep. Bus. v. Sebelius*, 567 U.S. 519, 536 (2012) (the Commerce Clause “must be read carefully to avoid creating a general federal authority akin to the police power”).

III. This Court should grant certiorari to address the constitutional issues in another case and hold the instant petition pending the outcome.

Darius James Francis did not challenge the constitutionality of the statute at the district court. This may present an insurmountable vehicle problem for a plenary grant in the present case. Nonetheless, the questions presented are worthy of certiorari, and the Court has other opportunities to review them.

If the Court grants certiorari to decide the constitutionality of § 922(g)(1) in *Range*, for instance, it may recognize the unconstitutionality of § 922(g)(1) in a substantial number of cases. Indeed, this Court may well find that the Second Amendment even supports a facial challenge to § 922(g)(1). In dissent, Judge Krause in *Range* expressed serious doubts as to whether the logic of that decision could be contained to those convicted of relatively innocuous felonies. *See, e.g., Range*, 69 F.4th at 131-32 (Krause, J., dissenting). The Seventh Circuit likewise questioned any dividing line based on “dangerousness.” *See Atkinson*, 70 F.4th at 1023. And the Southern District of Mississippi has sustained a

Second Amendment challenge to a defendant previously convicted of aggravated assault and manslaughter. *United States v. Bullock*, No. 3:18-CR-165-CWR-FKB, 2023 WL 4232309, at *2-3 (S.D. Miss. June 28, 2023). But even if the Court declines to grant certiorari in *Range*, this Court at minimum should hold the instant petition pending its decision in *Rahimi*. A victory for Rahimi likely will involve a rejection of the government’s contention that the Second Amendment is limited to those Congress deems “law abiding.” *See Rahimi*, 61 F.4th at 451-53. It will also require the Court to consider and reject historical analogues to § 922(g)(8), including some also offered in support of § 922(g)(1). *Compare Rahimi*, 61 F.4th at 456-57, with *Range*, 69 F.4th at 104-05.

In short, the Court may ultimately grant certiorari to address either question presented. If so, Francis requests that it hold the instant petition pending the outcome. Should this Court disapprove of § 922(g)’s constitutionality or limit the statute’s application, Francis requests that the Court grant certiorari in the instant case, vacate the judgment below, and remand for reconsideration. *See Lawrence on Behalf of Lawrence v. Chater*, 516 U.S. 163, 166-67 (1996).

CONCLUSION

The petition for a writ of certiorari should be granted.

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Respectfully submitted,

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